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C O N F I D E N T I A L VILNIUS 000492

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SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR PM KIRKILAS'S VISIT TO WASHINGTON

Classified By: Ambassador John A. Cloud for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Prime Minister Gediminas Kirkilas comes to Washington at a time of change for Lithuania. In less than a generation, the country has gone from the yoke of Soviet authoritarianism to being an EU and NATO member, punching above its weight in out of area missions. However, having achieved its twin goals of membership in the Western institutions, the country at times seems rudderless, unsure of where it wants to go next, or what it wants to be. It remains and wants to remain a staunch U.S. ally, but as it moves increasingly deeper into the EU's institutions, we sometimes find less willingness to support U.S. interests. Your meeting is an opportunity to reinforce our friendship, and to encourage this small ally to keep up the good work where appropriate and to continue transforming into a modern state with values-based policies where work remains to be done.

Afghanistan

¶2. (C) Lithuania deserves praise for what it has achieved in Afghanistan, and Prime Minister (and former Defense Minister) Kirkilas can be proud of his role in this area. Lithuania is working to expand its Special Forces mission in the South by adding Latvian troops to its contingent. Even more impressive has been the GOL's taking on the leadership of the PRT in Ghor Province. Ghor was relatively quiet until recently, but the PRT has been attacked several times in the past month and the first Lithuanian soldier has been killed. The GOL is keenly aware that it has been unable to finance any major development projects there, despite devoting nearly half of its very small foreign aid budget to Ghor. USAID Administrator Fore and Assistant Secretary Boucher recently gave the GOL a hand by meeting with FM Vaitiekunas and the heads of the Kuwaiti, UAE, and Saudi delegations on the margins of the Paris Conference. The latter two delegations expressed interest in funding a road project and the repaving of the Chagcharan airstrip, subject to some conditions. We are encouraging the GOL to follow up on that interest by provide these potential donors with feasibility studies and solid plans quickly.

Iraq

¶3. (C) Unlike Afghanistan, Lithuanian willingness to continue its deployment in Iraq has been problematic. Although Kirkilas and President Adamkus understand that we value the Lithuanian contribution, DefMin Olekas (Kirkilas's rival within the Social Democratic Party) believes our main interest is to have the Lithuanian flag in Iraq. From that perspective, he views any significant deployment of troops to Iraq through the lens of this October's upcoming Parliamentary elections, and sees continued deployment there as a threat to his future political viability. This was made evident by the great difficulty we went through to convince the GOL to continue supporting MNF-I after the Danes pulled out in 2007 (Lithuania had been dependent upon the Danes for logistical support).

¶4. (C) Following appeals from both Secretary Gates and General Petraeus in March that Lithuania extend its platoon

deployment to al-Kut, Olekas conceded to only a two-month extension (through the end of July). He dug his heels in on further deployment and, we learned June 19, Kirkilas and Adamkus gave in, for fear of bringing the government down. Foreign Minister Vaitiekunas told me June 24 that he and others are still working to gain GOL approval for a different platoon-level deployment under MNF-I. If he does not succeed, this will leave only a few Lithuanian trainers and staff officers in Iraq through the end of 2008, and no firm commitment to any Lithuanian contribution beginning in 2009. Nevertheless, I would hope Washington interlocutors would thank Kirkilas for Lithuania staying in MNF-I long after most EU countries bailed, and for trying to keep them longer.

(In)Tolerance

15. (C) The area where Lithuania has perhaps the most work to do is in changing its society into one that is tolerant of differences. In my time in Vilnius, we have seen an up tick in public displays of intolerance. Among a worrying number of examples: African students at an American-supported university in Klaipeda were taunted and attacked as they walked to classes, an African American basketball player was jumped on the streets of Old Town Vilnius, a group of skinheads marched down Vilnius' main shopping street shouting xenophobic and anti-Semitic slogans, and the Government passed a law prohibiting those coming to work or study in Lithuania from bringing their non-EU national families for two years.

16. (C) The most immediate problem involves the GOL's inability to resolve post-Holocaust issues. Congress has resolutions pending that would rebuke Lithuania for its failure to pass legislation to reconstitute communal Jewish property taken from its owners during WWII, and for its failure to protect an historic Jewish cemetery in downtown Vilnius from development and possible desecration. The Kirkilas government has been remiss on both. Despite repeated promises, the PM has been unwilling to bring restitution legislation to the parliament, and has allowed coalition politics and poor implementation to undermine nearly all of his positive decisions regarding the cemetery. It would be helpful to remind him that we are in an alliance of shared values and the GOL's continued inability or refusal to make real progress on these issues is damaging to our long-term relationship.

Energy

17. (C) Energy is a topic dear to PM Kirkilas's heart. Nonetheless, his government has lost considerable time addressing Lithuania's key energy challenge: the planned closure of the Ignalina Nuclear Power Plant (INPP) at the end of 2009. Lithuania agreed to the ultimate closure of this Chernobyl-style plant, which currently provides 70 percent of Lithuania's electricity, as a term of its EU accession. With almost no energy links to western Europe, the closure will leave Lithuania wholly dependent on Russia for its power (either through imported electricity, or gas to supply gas-fired power plants). In the two years Kirkilas has been in office, the GOL has spent an inordinate amount of time debating how to convince the EU to allow the nuclear plant to remain open longer (a strategy we believe has little to no chance of success) while making little progress in working with partners Estonia, Latvia, and Poland on the plans for building a replacement nuclear plant. In addition to our support for energy security for Lithuania, two American companies have expressed interest in building the new plant. (He will have separate meetings with these companies while in Washington.) We are doing all we can to promote an open bidding process, and to support American chances to win this multi-billion Euro deal.

Visa Waiver Program

18. (C) The Prime Minister will almost certainly raise prospects for joining the Visa Waiver Program in his

meetings, as it is the headline-grabbing topic here among our bilateral issues. Thanks to an improving domestic economy and vast job opportunities in the EU, we have observed a marked decrease in the number of Lithuanians seeking illegal employment in the United States. This has dramatically lowered our visa refusal rate. Lithuania is also making strong progress toward the other benchmarks it needs to hit in order to qualify for VWP.

Missile Defense

¶9. (C) Lithuania is ready in principle to host the MD interceptor site should negotiations with Poland fail. PM Kirkilas may raise with you the status of our talks with Warsaw. Kirkilas is concerned that he not be seen as having undercut the Poles.

¶10. (SBU) FYI, the U.S. will start a NATO air policing rotation, based in Lithuania, October 1 for three months. This is an important issue for Lithuania, which sees air policing as a concrete example of NATO's protecting role.

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